

Chapter 12A --Phthisic, Bootleggers and Romance

Saulsbury, in West Tennessee, was a pleasant place in many respects. The soil was sandy, but not so much so as to keep us from raising a garden. For a dollar a month we were able to rent a pasture half a mile behind the house and keep a cow. Father and Mother both taught, and the second year the school trustees added another room and a primary teacher. Ernest was able to teach a nearby country school during summer vacation. Shirley had a good music teacher and made so much progress that we bought her a piano after the first year -- an Adler, costing ¹⁶\$106 new, paid for at \$10 ¹⁸⁷¹⁵⁴a month. The teacher, whose parents had subscribed for Youths Companion because she had a crippled leg from "infantile paralysis," gave us a store of the magazines from her girlhood in the 1880s and early 1890s. They were delightful reading. Shirley had a close friend, Miriam Godsay, whose grandmother lived next door, and Walter a friend, ^{John}Bob Elliott. In strawberry season we could pick berries ~~###~~ at one cent a quaft -- good pay, considering the farmers were getting only ten cents.

There were some drawbacks: Summer heat was fierce; nearly all the women "dipped" snuff, and Malaria was rife, with fever and chills. Often a child would miss school with the explanation that it was "his day to shake." We all had to take quinine now and then; but things were far better than a few years earlier when quinine was kept on the table, and taken at every meal, and when yellow fever epidemics carried off people by droves.

Worst of all, early the first autumn I came down with a severe attack of asthma, and these continued at frequent intervals. Dr. Goddard, an 80-year-old Englishman, diagnosed it correctly as "phthisic," which we didn't know for years was ^{an old name for}pulmonary tuberculosis.

We'd probably have stayed longer at Saulsbury if it hadn't been for my illness. The second spring I had such a long and bad spell that they had Ernest come home early from college as his last chance to see me alive. To complicate matters there was an epidemic of whooping-cough, and folk wisdom said "If a child with asthma gets the whooping-cough it will either kill him or cure him." I got it, and singularly enough didn't have another serious attack for nearly forty years.

Meanwhile, Dr. Goddard had told Father that my only chance for life was to get me into a healthier climate, preferably the Mountains. Father scratched around and finally located a job for himself and Mother at Dawsonville, Georgia, which didn't look like too bad a prospect. It was the county seat of an isolated mountain county without a railroad and where most houses were only lighted with candles. But they reported a new schoolhouse was being built.

When we got there the climate was perfect. But there was no house to rent, and we had to board with a Conveterate veteran and his wife. Father, Mother and Ernest spent the summer boning up, and all passed the examination for teachers' licenses. To raise money for the new school, whose cement walls were only half built, we promoted, coached and put on a play -- the first most in the area had ever seen, and the only one I ever saw presented by candle light in the tobacco-spit stained single courtroom.

We soon learned that the principal industry of the county was moonshining, the product being hauled down to Atlanta by wagon. Everyone knew who was making the liquor, by the wagonloads of corn meal they were hauling out to their farms.

Mother, ever an ardent prohibitionist, wrote letters urging law enforcement, signing them B. A. Booster, and they were published by the friendly editor of the local weekly paper. They created quite a stir.

Classes started on time, with Ernest returning to college. But Father had quickly recognized that the new school building was at best years away, and that ~~we~~ ^{we} would never fit into that community, and he had begun looking elsewhere with the aid of our old Standby, Southern Teachers' Agency. Early in November ¹⁹⁰⁴ it brought an invitation for him and Mother to teach at Trenton, a small town in extreme northwest Georgia, located on Lookout Creek between Lookout Mountain and Sand Mountain, 18 miles by rail from Chattanooga, Tenn. I don't know what had caused the vacancy, but we were away like a shot, and soon living in an old brick house, near the school.

The move proved to be good in several ways: The climate was salubrious, and at the edge of town was a beautiful sulphur spring whose waters were said to have curative powers. Dr. Brock, the town physician, treated me with what he said was powdered rhubarb root, and whether from the air, water, rhubarb or whooping-cough I quickly became well and strong.

I learned to play "tracks," a rudimentary game of marbles; and since Mother allowed me for the first time to have a single-bladed Barlow knife without breaking off the point, I learned mumblepeg, an extremely complex game of throwing or flipping a knife in various ways so that it will stick in the ground.

Ernest came home for Christmas, was invited to a party one night and came home announcing: "I've just met the girl I'm going to marry." She was Winnie Gross, ^{almost 18,} a high school senior, whose father was a Confederate veteran[?] and a well-to-do farmer. Instead of going back to college he got a teaching job in Tennessee, and they must have corresponded regularly.

As summer approached, Father was strongly urged by a coal mining company to take over the school at its Durham "patch" (the post office was Pittsburg and neither has existed for years) on the top of Lookout Mountain, sixteen miles from Chattanooga, but only seven from Trenton by a difficult trail called Jacob's Ladder. He had already dealt with a school at Jenkinsburg, fifty miles south of Atlanta, but agreed that he, Ernest and Shirley would teach for four months at Durham. I doubt that it was even a state school, since Shirley was not quite sixteen and had no certificate.

Our stay on the mountain was quite pleasant, except for a month's struggle to rid the house of bedbugs. Mother wrote, Walter and I roved the woods, and there were no school problems. War broke out in Europe, but didn't affect us. Our nearest neighbors, the McDaniels, were friendly, and we took turns freezing ice cream and having one another over. Then tragedy struck: their oldest daughter, about 18, suddenly began bleeding at every orifice; the company doctor had no idea of the trouble, and in a few days she was dead. I had been to many funerals, but had never seen a corpse laid out on a bed, and was deeply impressed.

Ernest and Winnie became engaged soon after he came home in May, and every weekend he would walk down and up Jacob's Ladder for a visit. Once he took Walter along, and when they didn't return by an hour after dark, an alarm was sounded; within minutes, it seemed, the whole mountainside was dotted with miners' carbide lights in the search. (There was no electricity, of course.) But soon a gun was fired as a signal the prodigals were found. They had just overstayed their time and found the climb in the dark slow till they met the miners.

In one respect that summer on Lookout was one of the most important of my life. Ernest had brought home a box Kodak (a 3A, 3/4x4 1/2 Brownie) and amateur equipment given him in lieu of a bad debt of \$4. He taught Walter and me the developing and printing, and took class pictures and some others, selling the prints at ten cents. By the end of the summer we had become expert finishers and darkroom men, a skill that paved my way into the photo service (with Victor Kepler) and then my best hobo job/a decade later, and finally into newspaper work, when the only openings were for photo-reporters.

At the end of August we went back to Trenton for the wedding, spent the night at the Ford Hotel in Chattanooga, and were off by train, most of us to Jenkinsburg, Ernest and Winnie to Florida, where he had a call to preach.